

**APPLICATION
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TITLE: GENERAL REMOTE TRANSLATOR

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GENERAL REMOTE TRANSLATOR

Background of Invention

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates generally to voice-recognition devices.

Background Art

[0002] The use of speech-recognition (or voice-recognition) technology is becoming a viable means to control one's environment. As the sophistication of the speech-recognition technology increases and the cost of the equipment decreases, the use of speech-activated devices will become commonplace. Applications for speech recognition technology are numerous. Obvious examples include the control of appliances, consumer electronics, toys, and tools. Speech recognition technology is most useful when the hands and/or eyes are busy or useless, e.g., while driving or in a dark room. Furthermore, speech recognition technology can be a big help for people with physical impairments.

[0003] Speech recognition technology has been under development for several decades. This development has resulted in a variety of hardware and software tools for personal computers. Voice-recognition systems used to require specialized circuit boards (i.e., those with digital signal processors (DSPs)) and software. With the development of more powerful and sophisticated computer hardware, the need for specialized circuit boards has disappeared. Currently, most voice-recognition software can take advantage of the generally available computer hardware.

[0004] Voice-recognition technology comes in two flavors: finite command recognition (trivial voice recognition) and true dictation recognition (nontrivial voice recognition). The trivial voice recognition simply matches the speech pattern of a spoken command with a stored set of known commands. This type of voice recognition is relatively straightforward and does not require costly and bulky equipment or software. In contrast, the nontrivial voice recognition can analyze the voice to recognize parts of speech,

grammar, word meaning, and context. This type of voice recognition requires relatively expensive hardware and software. The hardware for nontrivial voice recognition tends to be bulky and cannot be incorporated into small devices.

[0005] The nontrivial voice-recognition technology can be further subdivided into two categories: discrete and continuous voice recognition. In discrete voice recognition, each spoken word must be separated by a brief pause (usually a few tenths of a second) so that the computer may distinguish the beginning and ending of words. In contrast, continuous voice recognition requires no pauses between the words and can process words spoken in a normal speech. The degree of sophistication of a continuous speech recognition system is often determined by the size of its vocabulary.

[0006] Speech recognition tools also can be classified into speaker-dependent and speaker-independent categories. The speaker dependent tools require a user to participate in extensive training exercises to drill the system to recognize the user's voice profile. The machine will then respond to the specific user. After such training, the accuracy of speech recognition is usually respectable. With a speaker independent system, on the other hand, no training of the system is required; any user can begin to use the machine, which will then attempt to adapt ("train") itself to the voice profile of the user. With the speaker independent system, the initial accuracy rate for voice recognition is less desirable, but it increases with use.

[0007] The choice of which type of voice-recognition applications to use is often dictated by the resources required. The cost of nontrivial speech-recognition tools has come down significantly in recent years. However, it is typically still too expensive to be deployed in remote controls for appliances such as household appliances and consumer electronics (herein, "appliance" will be used as a general term to refer to all types of electrical appliances and consumer electronics used in households or vehicles). In addition, the hardware required for nontrivial applications tends to be too bulky to be incorporated into small consumer products. In contrast, remote controls using other technologies (e.g., push buttons plus infrared or radio frequency transmitters) are more affordable. Consequently, they are widely used for controlling consumer electronics and appliances.

[0008] U.S. Patent No. 6,119,088, issued to Ciluffo, discloses a voice-activated remote control that uses the trivial command recognition technology and allows for only dozens of preprogrammed voice commands. U.S. Patent No. 6,188,986 B1 issued to Matulich et al., discloses a voice-activated device that controls a household electrical switch or an AC circuit. The Matulich device also uses the trivial voice-recognition technology. Thus, there exists a need to have remote controls that can respond to more sophisticated voice commands such as "VCR, tape the program from 8 to 9 PM and from 10 to 11 PM tonight." This type of sophisticated command will require nontrivial, continuous voice-recognition technology.

Summary of Invention

[0009] One aspect of the present invention relates to voice-translating remote controls for appliances, such as stereos, video cassette recorders (VCR), televisions (TV), coffee makers, microwave ovens, and lights. As a result, the remote control acts as a translator from voice (analog) to remote control commands (digital). One embodiment of the invention comprises a voice-translating remote control that includes a microphone and an audio input transmitter. The microphone receives voice input from a user, thereby outputting a voice signal. The audio transmitter transmits an audio input signal based on the voice signal to a host system, which includes a voice-recognition processor. After the host system has processed the audio input signal, it transmits a control signal directly to an appliance.

[0010] In another embodiment, the voice-translating remote control further comprises a signal receiver and a signal transmitter, which are operably connected. In this embodiment, the host system, after processing the audio input signal, transmits a command signal to the signal receiver in the remote control. The signal transmitter in the remote control then transmits a control signal based on the command signal to an appliance.

[0011] Another aspect of the invention relates to a system for voice-activated control of an appliance. The system comprises a host system and a remote control. The host system comprises a host receiver, a voice-recognition processor, and a host transmitter.

The remote control comprises a microphone to receive voice command and to output a voice signal. An audio input signal based on the voice signal is transmitted by a suitable transmitter (e.g., an audio transmitter) in the remote control to the host system. The audio input signal received by the host system is processed by the voice-recognition processor to generate a command signal which is then transmitted either directly to the appliance or to the remote control which then transmits a control signal based on the command signal to an appliance.

[0012] In yet another aspect, embodiments of the invention relate to methods for controlling an appliance by voice command. The method comprises receiving a voice command by the remote control to output a voice signal, transmitting an audio input signal based on the voice signal by an audio transmitter in the remote control to the host system, processing the audio input signal by the voice-recognition processor in the host system to generate a command signal, and transmitting the command signal to an appliance or to the remote control which then retransmits a control signal based on the command signal to an appliance. The remote control may require user interaction/acknowledgment before forwarding the command signal to an appliance.

[0013] One advantage of the invention is that the voice-translating remote controls of the present invention may use the traditional, affordable infrared or RF technology, but provide the convenience and flexibility afforded by voice-recognition technology. By using a host system to handle speech-recognition, there is no need to duplicate the expensive resources for each control for the appliances and consumer electronic devices. Furthermore, by having a separate host system to process the voice recognition, the system is highly customizable. The programs for translation or voice recognition can easily be updated or changed, and the host has to "learn" only once the characteristics of a user's voice, appliance identification information, etc. Similarly, when updating a user's voice (when adding or changing a user) or appliance identification information, it is much simpler to update a host system than to update each remote control. Other advantages of the present invention will become apparent with the following discussion.

Brief Description of Drawings

[0014] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a voice-translating remote control system of the present invention.

[0015] FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a voice-translating remote control of the present invention.

[0016] FIG. 2A is a schematic diagram of another embodiment of a voice-translating remote control of the present invention.

[0017] FIG. 2B is a schematic diagram of another embodiment of a voice-translating remote control of the present invention.

[0018] FIG. 2C is a schematic diagram of another embodiment of a voice-translating remote control of the present invention.

[0019] FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a voice-recognition processor of the present invention.

[0020] FIG. 4 is a flow chart of the steps involved in some embodiments of a voice-translating remote control system of the present invention.

Detailed Description

[0021] The invention relates to use of the nontrivial voice-recognition resources in a way that is affordable such that they can be used to control various electronic and electrical devices such as those found in homes, automobiles, boats, etc. Embodiments of the present invention employ a nontrivial voice-recognition resource centralized in a machine separate from the remote control units so that the expensive voice-recognition resources need not be duplicated for each remote control and/or appliance. Using the voice-recognition resources in the host system, the remote controls behave as a general remote translator (GRT), which can translate relatively sophisticated voice command into a proper control signal for any specific appliance. These remote controls may be generally referred to as "voice-translating remote controls."

[0022] FIG. 1 illustrates a schematic diagram of one embodiment of the present invention. A user 11 utters a voice command 21, which is not limited to the preprogrammed short command words, to a remote control 10. "Remote control" is generally used herein to refer to a device for controlling an appliance; it may look like, but is not identical to, a *conventional* remote control. In some embodiments, the remote control 10 may include a user interface (which may include an LCD display) and may look like a cellular phone or a personal digital assistant (e.g., a Palm Pilot™ from Palm, Inc., of Santa Clara, California). Embodiments of the invention can also be used in an embedded system. For example, a device equivalent to the remote control 10 may be installed in a car to allow a driver to talk commands.

[0023] An audio input signal 25 is derived from the voice command 21 and transmitted to a host receiver 51 on a remote host system 50. The host system 50, which can be a dedicated unit or part of a general use computer, includes the host receiver 51, a voice-recognition processor 52, and a host transmitter 53. The voice-recognition processor 52 includes the necessary hardware and software for processing the voice recognition.

[0024] The audio input signal 25 received by the host receiver 51 is processed by the voice-recognition processor 52 to generate a command signal 35, which is transmitted by the host transmitter 53 to the remote control 10. The command signal 35 could include information such as the identity of the appliance 60 to be controlled and the command to be sent to the appliance 60. In this case, the identity of appliance 60 is extracted from the audio input signal 25 by the voice-recognition processor 52, which has in its memory (not shown) such identification information and the correct carrier frequency or pulse pattern (IR or RF) to control this particular appliance. In one embodiment, such appliance identification information and corresponding unique frequencies or pulse patterns could be remotely updated periodically from a database server connected to the Internet.

[0025] Alternatively, the command signal 35 may not include the appliance 60 identification information. Instead, a user may perform some act (e.g., pressing a button or a combination of buttons) on the remote control 10 to identify the appliance 60 to be controlled. In yet another embodiment, shown in FIG. 2A, the remote control may

include a trivial voice-recognition processor **15**, which extracts the appliance identification information from the voice signal **26**. The appliance identification information (or unique frequency or pulse pattern) may be sent to the audio transmitter **20** to be included in the audio input signal **25** sent to the host system **50**. Alternatively, this identification information may be used by the remote control **10** to generate a proper frequency or pulse pattern to encode the control signal **16** sent to the appliance **60**.

[0026] The host system **50** may be a dedicated machine (an appliance) or part of a computer. It can be situated on the premises where the appliance **60** is located or it can be in a remote location so long as the remote control **10** (GRT) can communicate with the host system **50**. Such communication, i.e., the transmission of the audio input signal **25** and the command signal **35** to and from the host system, can be accomplished either by wireless (e.g., radio frequency, microwave, or infrared communication) or wired (e.g., household wiring, local area network, wide area network, or internet) means. The wireless communication means is preferred for sake of mobility. The host system **50** does not have to be housed in one physical unit. For example, the host receiver **51** and the host transmitter **53** might be housed in separate units from that housing the voice-recognition processor **52**. If these units are housed in different physical units, they should be in communication via a wireless or wired means; preferably a wired means.

[0027] The command signal **35** received by the remote control **10** is transmitted as a control signal **16** to the appliance to be controlled **60**. The transmission of the control signal **16** can be accomplished by any of the wireless communication means such as infrared (IR) or radio frequency (RF). The type of the communication means will be determined by the receiver (not shown) on the appliance **60**. In some embodiments of the present invention, the receiver on the appliance **60** is that currently in use such that no modification need be made to the receiver. For those appliances currently without receivers (e.g., lights, microwave ovens, coffee makers, etc.), it is preferred that they will be equipped with these general use, low-cost receivers (e.g., IR or RF receivers) in order to take advantage of the present invention.

[0028] Alternatively, after the command signal 35 is received by the remote control 10, there is an additional step of acknowledgment or validation before a control signal 16 is sent to the appliance 60. The acknowledgment or validation step will allow a user to correct errors arising from voice-recognition or abort the command. In such an embodiment, the remote control 10 comprises a user interface to permit display of message associated with the command signal 35. Such a display may be an LCD display as that used in a cellular phone or a personal digital assistant (e.g., a Palm Pilot™ from Palm, Inc. of Santa Clara, California).

[0029] One skilled in the art will appreciate that the embodiment of FIG. 1 is for illustration only and variations of this embodiment are possible. For example, the command signal 35 generated by the voice-recognition processor 52 can be transmitted directly to the appliance 60. In such an embodiment, the command signal 35 will be in a format compatible with the common IR or RF receiver found on the appliance 60 and the remote control 10 will not need the second receiver (30 in FIG. 2) and the second transmitter (14 in FIG. 2).

[0030] FIG. 2 illustrates key components of the remote control 10. The remote control 10 includes a first receiver 12 (also referred to as a microphone) for receiving voice commands (21 in FIG. 1) and to output a voice signal 26. The remote control 10 also includes a first transmitter 20 (also referred to as an audio transmitter) to transmit audio input signal 25 based on the voice signal 26 to the host system 50. In some embodiments of the present invention, the audio input signal 25 and the voice signal 26 may be the same signal. In other embodiments, the audio input signal 25 and the voice signal 26 may have different characteristics. Further, the remote control 10 includes a second receiver 30 (a signal receiver) to receive the command signal 35 transmitted from the host system, and a second transmitter 14 (a signal transmitter) to transmit the control signal 16 to the appliance (60 in FIG. 1). In some embodiments, the second transmitter 14 is a type that will transmit IR or RF signals such as those commonly used with traditional remote controls. These key components constitute one embodiment of the remote control of the present invention. One skilled in the art will appreciate that many variations are possible without departing from the scope of the present invention. For example, the remote

control 10 may further include amplifiers or filters for signal conditioning, or the remote control 10 may not need the second receiver 30 and the second transmitter 14 if, as discussed above, the host system directly transmits the command signal 35 to the appliance 60.

[0031] FIG. 2A illustrates another embodiment of the remote control 10. In this embodiment, the remote control 10 further comprises a trivial voice-recognition processor 15. The voice-recognition processor 15 can extract the appliance identification information from the voice signal 26. Once extracted, the appliance identification information can be either included in the audio input signal 25 sent by the audio transmitter 20 or sent to the signal transmitter 14 to be used to encode the control signal 16.

[0032] FIG. 2B illustrates yet another embodiment of the remote control 10. In this embodiment, the remote control 10 further comprises a user interface 17, which may include a liquid crystal display (LCD) or other components (e.g., light emission diodes, LEDs) to display or indicate the contents of the command signal 35 or to indicate the correctness of the command signal 35. A "user interface" is used herein to refer to a device (or components) that provides feedback (e.g., via LCD or LED) and allows a user to acknowledge and/or make correction, if necessary, before forwarding a command to an appliance. In this embodiment, the user has an opportunity to acknowledge or validate the command signal 35 generated by the host system before sending the control signal 16 to the appliance 60. If there is any error in the command signal 35, the user may have an opportunity to correct the error or to abort the operation and start over. For example, the user interface 17 may display "VCR #1, record channel 13 from 6 PM to 8 PM." Then, the user will acknowledge and send the command to the appliance (VCR #1), if this is correct. Otherwise, the user may correct the error or abort the operation by not sending the control signal 16. Inclusion of such an acknowledgment and validating step in the embodiments of the present invention is preferred because the reliability of voice-recognition technology is not yet foolproof.

[0033] A further embodiment, which includes both a trivial voice-recognition processor 15 and a user interface 17, is illustrated in FIG. 2C. In this embodiment, the remote control 10 has both advantages disclosed in the embodiments shown in FIG. 2B and FIG. 2C. That is, the remote control 10 as shown in the embodiment of FIG. 2C is capable of both extracting the appliance identification information from the voice signal 26 and allowing the user to acknowledge or validate the command.

[0034] Again, the embodiments as shown in FIGs 2, 2A, 2B, and 2C are for illustration only. One skilled in the art, with the benefit of this disclosure, will appreciate that other variations are possible without departing from the scope of the present invention.

[0035] The voice-recognition processor 52 of the host system 50 can be any of the voice-recognition systems known in the art or any modification thereof. FIG. 3 illustrates one example of a voice-recognition system. One skilled in the art will appreciate that other variations of the voice-recognition system can be substituted without departing from the scope of the present invention.

[0036] Referring to FIG. 3, the input signal 2 received from the host receiver 51 (see FIG. 1) is amplified by an input amplifier 4. Noise is removed from the amplified input signal by a bandpass filter 6, before it is sent to an automatic gain control 8, which is a feedback loop that accepts a varying input signal and uses feedback to maintain a constant output signal. The automatic gain control 8 is in constant communication with a microcontroller 40 by feeding a signal 84 to the microcontroller 40 and receiving a feedback signal 48 back from the microcontroller 40. The microcontroller 40 maintains an ambient signal level during a preset time window by sending the feedback signals 48 to the automatic gain control circuit 8. The ambient level is used as a starting level for recognizing speech. Any background noise received by the device during the time window that is below the ambient level is ignored. After the time window has expired, the device establishes a new ambient level. The microcontroller 40 can be a specialized digital signal processor or a general purpose microcontroller which is configurable for a variety of applications including speech recognition.

[0037] The microcontroller circuitry includes the microcontroller **40** and a number of memory modules such as a program memory **41** and speech command memory **42**. The program memory **41** may be a Read Only Memory (ROM) module which stores the programming code of the microcontroller **40**. The programming code establishes the sequence of events that are followed by the device to produce a control signal **44** in response to valid speech commands. The control signal **44** is delivered by an output control **43** to the host transmitter **53** (see FIG. 1) for transmission to the remote control **10** (see FIG. 1). The speech command memory **42** may employ a Random Access Memory (RAM) module which stores the speech commands. The microcontroller **40** may further include RAM memory (not shown) for performing voice recognition. The term "memory module" does not necessarily refer to separate circuit elements. For example, all ROM data may be stored in the same circuit element, but at different address block locations.

[0038] FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating how some embodiments of the present invention may operate. Before the voice-recognition system processes any signal, an ambient level of signal is established in step **71**. The ambient level is then compared with the audio input signal **25** (see FIG. 1) received by the host receiver **51** (see FIG. 1) in step **72**. If the audio input signal **25** is not above the ambient level, the voice-recognition system will not perform any processing and the system goes back to establish a new ambient level. If the audio input signal **25** is above the ambient level, then the audio input signal is processed in step **73** to generate a command signal **35** (see FIG. 1) in step **74**. Depending on the embodiments of the invention, the command signal **35** may be transmitted (pathway A) directly to the appliance **60** (see FIG. 1) or (pathway B) to the remote control **10** (see FIG. 1) in step **76**. If the command signal **35** is transmitted to the remote control **10** (pathway B), the command signal **35** may be used (pathway C) to generate a control signal **16** (see FIG. 2) for transmission to the appliance **60** in step **78**. Alternatively, the command signal **35** may be sent (pathway D) to a user interface **17** (see FIG. 2C) for user validation in step **77**. If the command signal is correct, the user may send it as a control signal **16** to the appliance **60** in step **78**. If the command signal **35** has some error, the user may correct the error and then send the corrected command in the

form of a control signal **16** to the appliance **60** in step **78**. Alternatively, the user may abort the operation, when the command signal includes error.

[0039] FIG. 4 illustrates examples of how some embodiments of the present invention may operate. These examples are not comprehensive; other variations are possible. For example, these systems may further include steps for signal amplification and noise filtering. One skilled in the art, having the benefit of this disclosure, will appreciate that other variations are possible without departing from the scope of the present invention.

[0040] While the invention has been described using a limited number of embodiments, those skilled in the art, having the benefit of this disclosure, will appreciate that other embodiments are possible without departing from the scope of the invention as disclosed herein. Accordingly, the scope of the invention should be limited only by the attached claims.